

Partners Outdoors XII

13 January 2003

LTG Flowers proposed remarks

Good morning. First, let me say thank you to Erwin Topper and the Lake Lanier staff for hosting this conference. And thank you to Derrick Crandall and the Recreation Roundtable for making the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers the focus of the 12th annual Partners Outdoors meeting.

The abundance of public recreation sites is one of America's great rewards. As the nation's largest provider of outdoor recreation, the Army Corps of Engineers is privileged to help provide meaningful and memorable outdoor experiences for the American people to enjoy.

Today, I'll discuss some of the challenges we face in meeting the public's recreation needs. I'll also share with you my belief that partnerships can help us overcome those challenges.

Before I continue, let me thank you for spending your valuable time and energy on improving recreation opportunities on public lands. I can't think of a better location to host a conference dedicated to that goal. Lake Lanier was on the world stage during the 1996 Olympics and we consider it our gold-medal recreation site. I understand that yesterday you toured this area, so you were able to see first hand why we think so.

Lake Lanier is our premier site, not just because it has more than eight million visits each year; and not because it's the most visited of all our recreation areas. It's our premier site because it represents partnership in motion. Lake Lanier lives and thrives on the partnerships -- with Marina operators, concessionaires, federal and state agencies, developers, environmental groups and volunteers.

We've discovered that partnerships are the key to finding solutions that can meet the greatest number of needs. When we put our heads together, we can find answers far better than anything we can think of by ourselves.

One great example is the C -D 'Toolbox for the Great Outdoors.' It's a wonderful tool to leverage recreation resources. And it came about through a lot of hard work by many partners. Many thanks to the American Recreation Coalition and Partners Outdoors Eleven for making this significant partnership succeed.

The National Recreation Reservation Service, also known as Reserve U-S-A dot com, is another excellent partnership example. This one-stop resource helps customers find and reserve spots at camping facilities managed by the Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Forest Service. Soon, the National Park Service will join us. We look forward to the new partnership and the ability to make it even easier to visit America's public recreation areas.

The timing couldn't be better. I believe that right now the healing power of recreation is needed more than ever before, as Americans deal with the effects caused by the continuing war on terrorism.

I know first hand the importance of outdoor recreation and how it fuels our mental, physical and spiritual well-being. While my children were growing, my family would spend at least one day each week outdoors. And one year, when we moved from Washington State to the east coast, we spent forty-five wonderful days camping across this great nation. We experienced some of the country's most magnificent recreation areas; it re-energized us and brought us closer together as a family. I suspect that some of you have had similar experiences.

I feel honored to be part of an organization that offers so many areas for relaxation and rejuvenation. The Army Corps of Engineers official role in recreation has flourished in the past fifty years. However, history shows that our commitment to preserving and enhancing recreational opportunities goes back more than 100 years.

In 1875, Captain William Ludlow saw sightseers carving initials on trees and breaking off rock formations in Yellowstone, America's first national park. He proposed several ways to balance visitation along with preserving the area for future enjoyment. His ideas became a blueprint for managing the park. As a result, Yellowstone continues its role as one of the crown jewels of National Parks.

Today, the Army Corps of Engineers is entrusted with more than 12 million acres of public land. On it, we have four thousand recreation sites at 456 lakes. We also manage 56,000 miles of shoreline.

Every year, these sites generate a total of four hundred million visits by people who enjoy camping, hiking, fishing, boating and viewing wildlife. These visits result in 15 billion dollars being spent each year on trip-related expenses and recreation goods. The sites are also responsible for the creation of hundreds of thousands of recreation-related jobs.

In the next few years, we foresee even more visitors as the nation commemorates the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark journey of discovery. Almost the entire five thousand mile journey is along land managed by the Corps.

We are fortunate that along with our business and government partners, we have 70,000 volunteers who help us keep up with the demand for recreation at our sites. Even with the great support, we are mindful of the challenges we face in our quest to serve the public with rewarding outdoor experiences. Let me describe three of our major challenges.

First, we must balance our recreation mission with many other military and civil responsibilities. Today, we have employees in more than 90 countries around the world, including Afghanistan, Israel, Peru and Uzbekistan. Currently, we are supporting the global war on terrorism with military and civil engineering expertise, research and development, and construction and real estate support.

Also, we are FEMA's engineers and provide emergency power, supplies, debris management and other support. Right now, we have employees in Guam helping the people recover from the affects of a devastating typhoon.

At home, we are responsible for environmental restoration, along with water resources development and management. We also have a role in homeland security. We have assessed all of the Army Corps of Engineers critical infrastructure, and are making security improvements where needed. Also, we are using our research and development expertise to strengthen and protect buildings from attack. We are one busy organization.

Now, for our second challenge. As we manage our recreation sites, we must find ways to balance competing needs. We must consider the needs of nature along with the desires of people. We must also find ways to address competing needs for water. It can be done, but it takes work. With cooperation and collaboration, we can find workable solutions, ones that address multiple needs.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Here at Lake Lanier, many people are interested in Bass fishing, which occurs upstream. Many others are interested in Trout fishing, which is downstream. We can create conditions to accommodate both, but it takes cooperation for both needs to be met.

Another example is in Missouri. At the suggestion of the State Fisheries Department and Johnny Morris of BASS Pro Shops, we held water levels constant at Bull Shoals and Table Rock lakes for a few weeks. By doing so, we were able to meet the needs for Bass to spawn, thus improving overall fishing opportunities. This is an excellent example of the State, the private sector and the Corps working in partnership to make positive things happen.

Many of our recreation business partners are concerned about the Corps releasing water for navigation and hydropower, especially during droughts. I know the lower lake levels affect recreation use and our recreation business partners. However, we are bound by Congress to release water during droughts. Even so, we'd like to find ways to minimize impacts to recreation and businesses. I ask for your help in finding workable solutions.

Our third challenge is providing quality recreation experiences with a decreasing budget. The Corps, along with other government agencies, are living with the effects of fewer dollars.

What this means is that right now we have a serious backlog of maintenance at our recreation sites. Our backlog of critical maintenance is approaching one hundred million dollars. Our total backlog is close to three times our annual recreation budget. We have not yet been successful in obtaining additional funding, but we will continue to press for more money.

We understand the importance of not only addressing the maintenance backlog, but of also modernizing our recreation areas. Providing locations that meet a variety of needs, such as more R-V spaces and tents, will create more opportunity for Americans – and for businesses.

Although we will continue to pursue funding sources, we also have another powerful option -- the creativity, flexibility and passion of people like you, who continually search for - and find - solutions.

We are seeking more partnership opportunities with government agencies and businesses. By doing so, we can develop innovative ways to overcome our challenges and improve opportunities on public lands. We realize that partnerships must flow in two directions. It isn't just a matter of what we can obtain from you. We want to know how our expertise and experience can help you meet your needs.

To assist us in this effort, we established a 'partnerships' position in our Natural Resources Management Branch. Ms. Debra Stokes, who is here today, will fill that role and handle most of our natural resources partnership efforts.

I know there is tremendous capability out there. And we are eager to help find solutions. Let's work together to improve the variety and quality of recreation opportunities on public lands. By doing so, we will help the American people store up reservoirs of good memories, ones that can sustain them in good or troubled times. It will also help the people of this great nation connect - not only with each other - but also to this great land, in a way that will keep them coming back for more.

Thank you. And as we say in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Essayons!

